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ABSTRACT

Since the 1970s, the Mexican-descent population of Guadalupe, California, has spearheaded a drive for local political representation. This paper examines their struggles and challenges the misconception of Mexican campesino immigrants as politically apathetic in their new homeland. From 1960 to 1990, the percentage of Guadalupe's population that was of Mexican descent rose from 18 to 83 percent, reflecting both an influx of Mexicans and a White exodus. The primary community division is between "natives" and newcomers, the latter comprised of Mexican Americans, Mexican immigrants, and a few Filipinos, all of whom came to Guadalupe as agricultural workers. The newcomers first challenged the political power of the natives in the 1970s, when newcomer children became the majority in the Guadalupe Union School District. Parent concerns included lack of bilingual education, labeling of Spanish-speaking children as learning disabled, and corporal punishment. Following parent protests, school boycotts, and the arrest and conviction of parents for inciting a riot, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission found that the town's education and justice systems had failed to uphold the civil rights of Mexican and Mexican American residents. After subsequent mass resignations in the school system, the school board began to work closely with newcomer parents. Due to the city's at-large electoral system, newcomers did not achieve representation in city government until the 1990s. Ironically, outrage over Proposition 187 fueled newcomer election victories. (SV)

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All Was Not Lost--
The Political Victories of Mexican Immigrants in Guadalupe, California

by: Victor Garcia

From *Immigration and Ethnic Communities: A Focus on Latinos*

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All Was Not Lost — The Political Victories of Mexican Immigrants in Guadalupe, California

Víctor García

The Mexican descent population[1] spearheaded a drive for political representation in Guadalupe, California. This paper examines their struggle and, at the same time, challenges the erroneous public opinion that portrays Mexican *campesino* (peasant) immigrants as politically apathetic in their new homeland. Many believe that those immigrants who keep their Mexican citizenship and are, therefore, not eligible to vote, have no interest in the political affairs of their U.S. community. On the contrary, I demonstrate that immigrants do take an interest in local politics, especially at the school district and city government levels. They have developed various strategies to overcome their limitations in the political arena, and now play a key role in local affairs.

Guadalupe

Guadalupe is a small community of almost 5,500 inhabitants occupying about 1 square mile in the midst of agricultural fields of the Santa Maria Valley. The town is 10 miles west of Santa Maria, the valley's largest city, about 5 miles from the coast, 45 miles south of San Luis Obispo, and 65 miles north of Santa Barbara. The surrounding fields of vegetables and strawberries offer year-round employment for some.

Guadalupe is no longer the prosperous community it once was, when it was home to local farmers and a major packing and shipping point for the valley. Today, it is a farmworker community in blight.[2] The packing sheds, once an important source of local employment and tax revenue, lost out in the technological change to in-field packing in the early 1980s. The city's ability to provide public services was weakened by the resulting strain on the tax base. Even worse, Guadalupe's resident field workers were replaced by migratory harvesters who follow the field-packing companies from one harvest to another, leaving local workers without gainful employment. As a result, many of them now face unemployment and poverty.

The History of the Community

Mexicans have long been a part of Guadalupe's history. In the 1860s, before there was a town, Mexicans lived and worked in the Rancho of Guadalupe (García 1992). The town itself was founded in 1872; about 20 years later the ranch acreage was subdivided into farm parcels and sold to white farmers.

In the 1920s, Mexican immigrants were recruited to work in local agriculture. Most lived in labor camps situated outside of town, but a few joined the small number of their compatriots who lived in town. In the 1940s, hundreds of temporary workers recruited through the Bracero Program[3] came to the area. They increased the numbers living in nearby camps, leaving Guadalupe primarily inhabited by local merchants, farmers, and nonagricultural workers and their families (García 1992).

After the termination of the Bracero Program in 1964, the community witnessed its first large influx of Mexican immigrants. Fearful of a labor shortage, many local growers encouraged and assisted ex-bracero workers and their families to settle in the area. This time, many came to town where affordable housing and schools were available. Over the decades, the ex-braceros sponsored the immigration of their kin from back home. Today many of Guadalupe's inhabitants were originally from the Mexican states of Guanajuato and Jalisco (García 1992).

The ex-bracero immigrants and their families, together with other Mexicans, who joined them in the following decades, rapidly changed the ethnic composition of Guadalupe from 18 percent

[1]The Mexican descent population includes residents, whether U.S. citizens or not, who trace their origins to Mexico, plus their U.S.-born children.

[2]"Blight" is used to describe poverty that cannot be solved with local resources alone. The Redevelopment Agency of Guadalupe (1985) defines blight as "an area characterized by physical, social, economic, and environmental conditions which cause an improper utilization of an area to such an extent that it constitutes a serious burden on the community that cannot be alleviated by the private sector acting alone."

[3]The Bracero Program began in 1944 as an emergency bilateral labor agreement between Mexico and the United States, whereby Mexican labor was provided to U.S. agricultural industries during World War II. Under the auspices of Public Law 78, the program continued until 1964. Mexican laborers, many of them peasants, were contracted by U.S. growers, as well as railroad companies.

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Mexican in 1960 to 83 percent in 1990 (Table 1). With the population remaining almost constant for two decades before increasing in the 1980s, the data show both the influx of Mexicans and a white exodus.

Table 1. Population of Guadalupe, Calif., and the Percentage of Mexican Descent, 1960-1990

Year	*Total Population*	*Percentage Mexican*
1960	3,225	18%
1970	3,240	66%
1980	3,632	74%
1990	5,479	83%

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *California General Population Characteristics*, Washington, DC, 1972, 1982, 1992.

Guadalupe is not the only community in California to undergo this population change over the last three decades. In fact, an additional 130 communities in farming areas throughout California have been identified as experiencing a similar change (Palerm 1991).

"Newcomers" versus "Natives"

On the surface, it appears that the most basic division of Guadalupe's populace would be between those of the Mexican descent, now the majority, and the rest, mostly whites. However, in reality, the division is more along occupational and political than ethnic lines. A better division might be between, what I will call natives and newcomers.

Natives are residents who were born in the United States. They were not necessarily born and raised in Guadalupe, though some were. Some "natives" are even from the ranks of the Mexican descent population. Their distinguishing feature is that the natives are not from farmworker backgrounds — they work at other occupations or run businesses of their own, and financially, for the most part, they are doing relatively well.

The "newcomers," some who have been in Guadalupe since the 1960s, are post-Bracero Mexican immigrants and their Mexican- and U.S.-born children. While technically their U.S.-born children could be thought of as natives, their cultural orientation is toward their parents and other "newcomers." Although "native-born" they do not associate with nor align themselves politically with the old guard. And this old guard considers these U.S.-born children and young adults as outsiders. The distinguishing characteristics of the newcomers are their farmworker background and that, financially, they are not doing well. Their agricultural wages have declined over the years, and many are no longer gainfully employed.

The newcomer group also includes a small number of Filipino families who settled in Guadalupe in the 1940s and 1950s. They, too, were once agricultural workers.

Local natives — those born in Guadalupe some of whom can trace their origins two or three generations back — consider the community theirs. They believe that Guadalupe should return to the quaint agricultural town of the past, before the arrival of the Mexicans, whom they blame for the community's ills. Then, in the 1980s, these locals, who were diminishing in numbers as a result of white flight, were joined by senior citizens from other areas who moved to a new retirement community, Bonita Homes.[4] These two groups established a political alliance to maintain and further their interests. The local "insider" natives wanted to return to the Guadalupe of the past, while new "outsider" natives wanted a community free of the "Tijuana look" — a Guadalupe without farmworkers and poverty.

The newcomers also consider Guadalupe as their home town. The first-comers of this group are naturalized U.S. citizens and home owners, purchasing homes when housing was affordable in the 1960s and 1970s. In most cases, they sold or gave away their homes and landholdings in Mexico. Newcomer parents insist that their children — Mexican and U.S.-born — learn English and the "American Way of Life," without forgetting their Spanish. In short, newcomers see themselves as bone fide members of the community. They are quick to point out that they have lived in the community since the 1960s, and that through their hard work they have contributed to the development of local agriculture. Their interests are similar to those of many working-class people in the United States

[4]Bonita Homes consists of 106 units constructed in the late 1970s as senior citizen housing. Nearly all are owned and occupied by "outsiders," seniors who came to Guadalupe only recently. Many are retired professionals and are very active in local government.

— they want a good education for their children, job opportunities, and affordable housing.

The interests of the natives and newcomers are in conflict. Natives, remembering the prosperous community of old, blame the Mexicans for Guadalupe's blight. As some of them put it, "Everything was fine until they (the Mexicans) arrived." They would like to entice people of financial means to Guadalupe to counter balance its impoverished population. Their thinking is that, if such a preferred group were to settle locally, the socioeconomic characteristics of the population would change, and gradually the community would prosper once again. This belief manifests itself in the natives' push for up-scale housing to attract outsiders with money — housing that most of Guadalupe's residents could never afford.

Meanwhile, the newcomers are also making their interests known. They, too, want to better their community. They agree with the natives that improvements are needed, but they believe that solutions lie in expanding the local business base by recruiting companies to open shop in town. Success could eventually bring social service programs, like job training and affordable housing.

The Newcomer Quest for Political Representation

From 1946, when Guadalupe became incorporated as a city, through the 1970s, natives controlled the political institutions. They held all of the seats in the school board, city administration, city council, and commissions, such as the planning and recreation commissions. They had the resources, knowledge of the local political system, and constituted the majority of the community's voters. They maintained control over three decades without opposition from newcomers who were unable to organize a viable political challenge. Many newcomers, not being citizens, could neither vote nor seek public office. Recent arrivals did not understand the workings of the local political system. For a long time, their U.S.-born children were too young to vote. Newcomers were stymied when it came to launching a campaign or sponsoring a candidate.

Still, newcomers did not let their weak political status in the community stop them from fighting for justice. Whenever they saw an injustice, they spoke out. Initially, they fought their major liability in the local political arena — the lack of U.S. citizenship — by engaging in grassroots politics, such as organizing and holding rallies and marches. By the 1980s and 1990s, some of them who became citizens could complement these grassroots efforts by voting.

The First Native-Newcomer Clash

The newcomers first challenged the political power of the natives in the 1970s, when their children had became the majority of the students in the Guadalupe Union School District. As always, schools were major socialization institutions in the community. Schools not only educate the young and inculcate beliefs and values of society, they also serve as the major integrative force in the community.

In the 1970s, because of newcomers' concerns about their children's education in the local schools, they established *El Comité Consejero de los Padres de Familia* (Parents' Advisory Committee). While the committee's membership varied, it consisted of 20 members, including some who also belonged to organizations such as the United Farmworkers Union (UFW), *Pueblo Unido, Comite del Valle,* and the California Rural Legal Assistance. These organizations supported the Parents' Advisory Committee by providing advice, resources, and political support (González 1987).

Newcomers had two major concerns about their children's education. The first was language difficulties. Many of their children were monolingual Spanish-speakers and were having difficulty comprehending monolingual English-speaking teachers and the English language curriculums. Because of their language-caused learning difficulties, they were being tracked into learning-disability courses. A second serious concern was their children's complaints about being corporally punished. They claimed they were punished, even struck, by teachers, because, for example, of speaking Spanish on the school grounds (González 1987).

Organized by the Parents' Advisory Committee, parents attended school board meetings in large numbers, voiced their concerns, and demanded changes. They called for bilingual/bicultural principals, teachers, and curriculums and for an end to corporal punishment. To make their point, the Parents' Advisory Committee circulated petitions, held strategy meetings, marched and protested, and requested a boycott of local schools until their demands were met by the school board. During the boycott, newcomer

parents were encouraged to send their children to alternative classes, organized by the UFW, in the homes of members of the Parents' Advisory Committee (González 1987).

In 1972, 10 members of the Parents' Advisory Committee were arrested by local authorities at a special school board meeting, falsely charged with disturbing the peace and inciting a riot. The Guadalupe Ten, as they were later called, were convicted and given sentences ranging from three to six months in the county jail, all with three years probation.

At the request of the American Civil Liberties Union and the California Rural Legal Assistance, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission investigated claims of human rights violations in Guadalupe. The commission found evidence of corporal punishment in the schools and intimidation of the Parents' Advisory Committee. In the commission's report Guadalupe's political system was depicted as "feudal," and the town's system of education and administration of justice were denounced for failing to enforce the civil rights of the Mexican and Mexican-American population (*Comité Estatal Asesor de California* 1974).

The activism of newcomer parents, together with the investigative findings of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, brought real changes to the schools. Humiliated, the majority of the school administrators and teachers resigned and joined the white flight of other natives. The school board now listening to and working closely with newcomer parents, filled vacancies with bicultural/bilingual administrators and instructors recruited from outside of the community.

Satisfied with the changes in the local schools, the Parents' Advisory Committee disbanded, and newcomers turned their attention to improving their socioeconomic plight in the community. During the remainder of the 1970s, many joined the strikes and the boycotts organized by the UFW. The efforts of the UFW paid-off for a short time. From the late-1970s to the early 1980s, many growers in the Santa Maria Valley increased farm wages and improved working conditions on their own to keep the union from gaining ground in the valley.

Newcomer Attempts at Political Representation

By the mid-1980s, Santa Maria Valley growers defeated the UFW by replacing resident workers with migratory laborers. Vocal members of the newcomer group, who were active in the union, were black-listed by growers. Others, fearing reprisal, abandoned the union.

But all was not lost for the newcomers in the 1980s. Two newcomer leaders emerged who changed the political climate (see sidebars). Both were ex-braceros who settled in Guadalupe in the 1960s with their families. Both had been politicized by the activities of the Parents' Advisory Committee and the UFW. In fact, they worked closely together as union organizers in the 1970s, but later parted due to differences in opinion, adopting separate approaches in the struggle for political justice and representation in the community.

In the 1980s, as immigrants became citizens and their children became old enough to vote, the number of newcomer voters increased, making up from 10 to 20 percent of total voters. In spite of their growing numbers, however, gaining political representation in city government proved difficult, for they were not yet organized. They had never sponsored their own candidate and lacked a coherent political platform. And they still lacked a strong voting block. Many immigrants were not yet willing to become U.S. citizens, and many young Chicanos were not really interested in voting, thinking that their vote would not change anything.

Another problem compounding the difficulty of newcomers' gaining representation was the city's at-large electoral system. That is, the city is not divided into political districts; elected officials can live anywhere in town. Consequently, candidates with the highest number of votes win. As pointed out by Menchaca (1988, 1994) and Takash-Cruz (1990), this type of system allows dominant groups in the community, who do not represent the interests of competing groups, to control city councils.[5]

Nevertheless, the newcomers flexed their electorate muscle in the 1980s, creating political alliances and voting in blocks with others. In fact, these efforts paid off in 1981, when a progressive Filipino-Mexican American was elected to the city council. Later, another Filipino-Mexican

[5]Menchaca found this to be the case in Santa Paula, California, while Takash-Cruz studied Watsonville.

American was elected mayor. These two successful politicians were very active in addressing newcomer needs. For example, the first was, and continues to be, the director of the Guadalupe Community Health Center, a major health care provider of the newcomers.* He also pushed for and passed ordinances requiring absentee landlords to repair dilapidated rentals, many of which were rented by the newcomers.

Newcomers Gain Representation in City Government

The political maturity and voting power of the newcomers finally became manifest in the 1990s. Their voting numbers increased to about 30 percent of the total, due largely to citizenship drives and newcomer children reaching voting age. (However, the under-18 age group of newcomers still accounts for 40 percent of the community's total population.)

In 1992, as in the 1970s, newcomers were organized — this time into the *Familias Unidas* (see the sidebar). The objectives of this grassroots group were, and continue to be, the development of affordable housing for non-home owners and training programs and recreational facilities for young children and teenagers. Including all family members, the group represents nearly 2,000 persons. Members attend city council meetings and voice their needs. They also contact nonprofit organizations, such as the Peoples' Self-Help Housing Corporation, to solicit assistance in developing additional affordable housing. Well aware that local government only listens to voters, they work on citizenship and voter registration drives. They fund their activities by collecting dues and holding fund-raisers, such as dinners and raffles.

Like many other Mexican immigrant groups in California, *Familias Unidas* was outraged by Proposition 187 and organized to defeat it (Prop 187 is described on the next page). Also in 1994, there were two city council seats to be filled. For the first time, the newcomers, through *Familias Unidas*, sponsored their own candidate (see box). Months before 1994 election, the newcomers, under the auspices of *Familias Unidas*, adopted the grassroots tactics of the past. They held rallies and marches in town, protesting the proposition and denouncing its proponents, including Governor Pete Wilson. Unlike the efforts of the 1970s, they also stepped-up voter registration drives and raised funds to finance their candidate. Weeks before the election, they covered the community, knocking on doors and distributing flyers, and mailing campaign literature.

Overall, voter turnout was average. In a city of 5,479 residents and 1,747 registered voters, 993 votes were cast (18 percent of the population; 56.8 percent of the registered voters). It appears that many of the natives did not vote. Besides general apathy, this could have been due to all the negative campaigning associated with the statewide elections.

Thus, the political efforts of *Familias Unidas* paid off. The newcomers accounted for 541 of the votes or 54.4 percent of the total. Of the four candidates running for city council, the newcomers' candidate came in second, receiving 541 votes. In addition, Proposition 187 was defeated in Guadalupe, 541 to 421, while passing by a wide margin statewide.

Thus, for the first time since their arrival around 30 years ago, the newcomers succeeded in gaining true political representation in a community where they had become the majority 20 years ago.

Don Manuel Magaña, born in Uriangato, Guanajuato, became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1980 and encouraged other immigrant compatriots to do the same. He was politically active in local government, voting and attending city council meetings on a regular basis. Eventually, he was appointed to the city's planning commission, a position that allowed him to represent newcomers and to speak on their behalf. Through the Comité Cívico Mexicano and other local organizations, he urged newcomers to attend city council meetings, and organized citizenship and voter registration drives to increase the number of newcomer voters in the community.

*Personal communication with Ariston Julian, Director, November 1994.

Don Jesús Saucedo, born in Gachupines, Guanajuato, became a political broker long before gaining his U.S. citizenship in the late 1980s. In the early 1970s, with the help of the Orcutt Presbyterian Church, he established the Guadalupe Community Service Center and became its director. The center provided the needy of the community with food, job placement, and legal services. Those who had been helped, supported Don Jesús in his efforts to build a political constituency. They attended meetings at the center, where Don Jesús organized them into groups to attend public meetings and to voice their concerns and make demands. Candidates for public office, regardless of their political affiliation, were invited to speak at the center. If they agreed to support the political efforts of the newcomers, Don Jesús and his people would campaign for them.

One candidate was Don Jesús' oldest son, Javier Saucedo, a newcomer in his own right, being born in Gachupines, Mexico. Together with four siblings (out of eight), he immigrated to Guadalupe with his family in the late 1960s. While Javier was attending high school and immediately after graduation, he harvested crops for local growers, often joining his father in the fields. A few years after graduation, he obtained full-time employment outside of agriculture, painting air planes for a company in Santa Barbara. This position provided Javier with a regular income, substantially higher than what he had made as a farmworker, enabling him to establish credit and purchase a house in town. Today, he lives in Guadalupe with his wife and children, where he works for the Guadalupe Community Health Center as a community outreach worker.

In 1992, Don Jesús organized over 300 newcomer families into Familias Unidas, a local lobbying group to demonstrate the need for community development and to pressure the local government to act.

At the core of Familias Unidas (Families United) were Don Jesús' kin, consisting of his wife, Doña Cuca, their eight children, 16 grandchildren, and four great grandchildren. His kin network also includes his sons- and daughters-in-law, sons- and daughters-in-law of his grandchildren, and a number of compadres and comadres (godparents). In addition, Doña Cuca's sisters and their husbands, children, grandchildren, sons and daughters-in-law of their children and grandchildren belong. In all, there are over 70 consanguinal, affinal, and fictive kin in Don Jesús' local kin group.

Although the vast majority of the members of Familias Unidas are legal residents, some of them, including Jesús Saucedo, once were undocumented workers, and from their experience, are well aware of the hardships associated with being in the country illegally. They opposed Proposition 187 because, as some of them argued, undocumented residents pay taxes. As one member of Familias Unidas succinctly stated, "When we pay our taxes, they do not ask for citizenship papers!"

Concluding and Summarizing Comments

The objective of Proposition 187, according to its proponents, is to save California money by preventing undocumented residents from attending public schools and receiving public-funded medical services. The initiative requires that, except in an emergency situation, as defined by federal law, health care providers must verify the legal status of a patient before providing care. People who can not verify their citizenship or legal status will be denied care. In addition, the proposition provides that "no public elementary or secondary school shall admit, or permit the attendance of, any child who is not a citizen of the United States, alien lawfully admitted as a permanent resident, or a person who is otherwise authorized under federal law to be present in the United States." Moreover, it requires that each school district verify the legal status of each child already enrolled and in attendance in order to ensure that those in attendance are not undocumented residents.

In spite of their immigrant stock, the newcomers to Guadalupe were neither apathetic nor powerless. As a group, they recognized the importance of political activism from the outset and participated in the political affairs of their community.

Initially, noncitizenship and a high number of people below the voting age, together with an at-large electoral system, hindered their move from grassroots political tactics to effective voting

activity. Nonetheless, the newcomers did succeed in reforming the community's educational system in the 1970s. Changes were introduced peacefully in the Guadalupe Union School District. Although they could not yet institute reform through the vote, they used grassroots tactics, such as rallies, marches, and boycotts.

In the 1980s and 1990s, many newcomers to Guadalupe became citizens while their young reached voting age. They struggled for political power and representation in city government, by organizing into an interest group, *Familias Unidas*, and voicing their needs at city council meetings. They also worked on becoming a viable voting block, through citizenship and voter registration drives. However, it was not until Proposition 187 that they really became a power to be reckoned with. Ironically, Proposition 187, designed to dispossess undocumented immigrants from educational benefits and social services, galvanized the newcomers and helped place them in city government.

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